

# 27 Books

## Every Woodworker Should Read



Experts and editors weigh in on the volumes that fostered and fed their careers

Ask around and you may find two common themes among woodworkers: Their shops are overrun with old handplanes, and their bookshelves are brimming with inspiring tomes on the craft.

We decided to survey *Fine Woodworking's* staff members and regular contributors to find out which books have had the greatest impact on their woodworking careers. Many remember the book that first got them hooked or was responsible for influencing the techniques and philosophies that they continue to practice in their shops today.

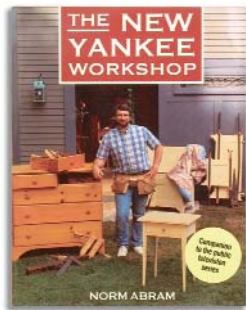
While some popular titles didn't make our list, the ones we compiled can serve as a great source of inspiration, as well as

provide answers to many questions about the properties of the materials, about the concepts of furniture design and craftsmanship, and about the techniques that have been practiced in the woodshop for centuries. They include some not-so-obvious titles as well as a few always-referenced ones, such as Ernest Joyce's *Encyclopedia of Furniture Making* and R. Bruce Hoadley's *Understanding Wood*. While some of these books could be considered antiques, the information they promote remains fresh.

If you ask us, all of these books are must-reads. And if nothing else, adding them to your collection may be just the inspiration you need to get started on that new bookcase you've been meaning to build.

[finewoodworking.com](http://finewoodworking.com)

Tell us your favorite book. Visit the Knots forum to discuss it on the Web.



## Launchpad for beginners

**The New Yankee Workshop** by Norm Abram. Little, Brown & Co., 1989.

After watching many episodes of *The New Yankee Workshop* with a mixture of admiration and disdain, I was surprised with the book as a Christmas gift from my wife in the early 1990s. I ended up building three or four projects of the dozen inside, including the workbench that I still have.

Advanced woodworkers like to poke fun at Abram with his every-power-tool-ever-made mentality and his reliance on combination stains and finishes, but he guides novices into woodworking, and for that we all should be grateful.

—Mark Schofield is an associate editor.

## A chair maker's chair maker

**Make a Chair From a Tree** by John D. Alexander. Astragal Press (look for the enlarged 1994 edition of the 1978 original).

This was the first book that I read from The Taunton Press, and to me it's the reference point for green-wood chair making. It came out in 1978 when very few people were riving out green wood and building projects with it. The book teaches about ring-porous woods such as oak, how they shrink, and what to expect out of them when used green. The author spent a lot of time researching the subject and running his own tests, and much of the information in the book remains sound, despite recent innovations. It's a wonderful testament to its quality that the book has been able to withstand 26 years of scrutiny during a period of time when green woodworking has proliferated.

—Curtis Buchanan is a chair maker in Jonesborough, Tenn.

## Encyclopedia of woods

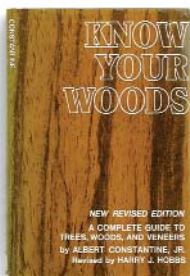
**Know Your Woods** by Albert Constantine Jr.; revisions by Harry J. Hobbs. Scribner Book Co., 1987.

I bought this book 25 years ago—a young and ignorant woodworking novice eager to learn about wood.

The author was active in the wood-supply business for many years (his family began importing mahogany to New York in 1812), and the book reflects his experience. In his introduction Constantine states, "The information given has been selected to provide the craftsman and layman with a broad, practical knowledge of woods." The book does exactly that, giving quick hits of several hundred kinds of wood.

Each one is listed by its preferred common name and its scientific name, along with a brief description of the color, uses, and physical properties of the lumber. This book is now out of print, but used copies are not hard to find (for more on buying out-of-print books, see the story on p. 85).

—William Duckworth is an associate editor.

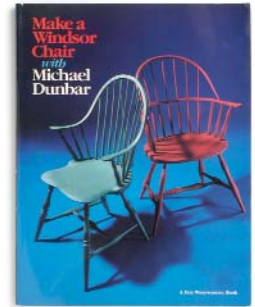


## The Windsor revival

**Make a Windsor Chair** with Michael Dunbar. The Taunton Press, 1984.

Hand-crafted Windsor chairs have been rediscovered in the past 20 years. Both hobbyists and professionals enjoy creating these classic pieces; the fact that they can be built in small shops without power equipment is appealing. Dunbar's book often is credited with inciting this revival. While he was in college, Dunbar became fascinated with Windsor chairs and set out to uncover much of the history behind them, building and selling them along the way. Over the past 20 years, he has taught thousands of students, and many of the professionals across the country who make Windsor chairs learned from his books or classes. Since the book was released, Dunbar has streamlined some of his methods, but his book offers all of the theory behind how the methods work.

—Kim Carleton Graves is a furniture maker in Brooklyn, N.Y.

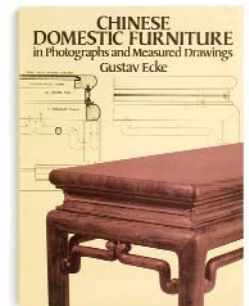


## Mysteries of the East

**Chinese Domestic Furniture** by Gustav Ecke. Dover Publications, 1986 (a reprint of the 1944 original with history, photos, and measured drawings).

Because I lived in San Francisco during my formative years as a woodworker, my approach to furniture design is heavily influenced by the styles of classic Japanese and Chinese furniture. Ecke's book was the first I found that provided inspiring photos, measurements, and detailed renderings of the complex and almost magical joinery required by these centuries-old furniture pieces I've always admired. While I don't yet have the skills or patience to hand-cut these joints, the original pieces presented in the book give me something to look forward to.

—Matt Berger is an associate editor.



## Textbook woodworking

**Furniture and Cabinet Making** by John L. Feirer. Bennett Publishing Co, 1983.

This was one of the first books I picked up when I started woodworking and needed a one-stop source for information. By today's standards, the photographs and examples of furniture look rather dated. But the information is timeless, and I still rely on this book when I need to look up something esoteric, such as how to draw an ellipse, or find tips on built-in cabinet construction. It reads like a typical high-school or vocational-school textbook—very dry—but the content is solid with lots of photos and illustrations. You won't learn how to fine-tune a handplane here, but you'll learn about the history of woodworking and its most common tools.

—Anatole Burkin is the editor.



## Simply beautiful furniture

*American Furniture from the Kaufman Collection* by Michael Flannigan. National Gallery of Art, 1986.

If I were trapped on a desert island, and I could have only one book with me, it would have to be this one. The large and brilliant color photos of these extraordinary furniture pieces suck me in every time I flip through its pages. The book shows off work from as early as 1690 through the mid-19th century (part of philanthropists Mr. and Mrs. George M. Kaufman's private collection exhibited in 1986 at the National Gallery of Art in Washington, D.C.). While it provides good background information on each piece, the book's greatest strength is in the variety of work shown.

—Steve Latta builds period furniture and teaches woodworking in Lancaster, Pa.

## The most practical, page for page

*Tago Frid Teaches Woodworking—Book 1: Joinery; Book 2: Shaping, Veneering, Finishing.* The Taunton Press, 1996.

“Krenov’s books had turned the world of woodworking upside down, revealing a special world without compromise. Frid’s books—like his approach—were more practical.”

—Mario Rodriguez

Just a few years after James Krenov wrote *The Cabinetmaker's Notebook*, Frid offered us his indispensable trilogy (Book 3 is sold separately). Krenov's books had turned the world of woodworking upside down, revealing a special world without compromise. Meanwhile, Frid's books—like his approach—were more practical. There are no pets lolling in the background or mugs of steaming coffee perched on the workbench. His is the kind of woodworking practiced in basement shops and garages. The techniques are clearly grounded in the nitty-gritty rituals and small setbacks of everyday woodworking. While they aren't the prettiest books, they're absolutely crammed with useful knowledge. Page for page, I don't think you can learn as much from any other book. If I were going to feast on woodworking books, I'd order a main course of Frid with a little Krenov on the side.

—Mario Rodriguez is a contributing editor.

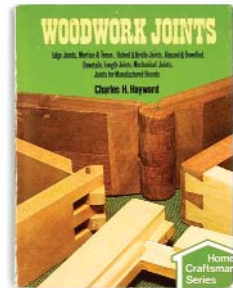
## The bible of joinery

*Woodwork Joints* by Charles Hayward. Sterling Publishing, 1979.

This book is filled with easy-to-understand illustrations of woodworking joints and how-to explanations on cutting and fitting the joints. Hayward's

clarity in visual presentation and the simple language he uses in the description of each joint, its construction and its function, make this book a leader in the field of books on woodworking joinery. Hayward also is co-author of *Wood Carving* (Sterling Publishing, 1979), a book I turned to regularly as I was learning to carve wood.

—Karen Wales is a woodworker and woodworking teacher.



## Classic American pieces

*American Furniture in the Metropolitan Museum of Art* by Morrison H. Heckscher. Metropolitan Museum of Art and Random House, 1985.

From a design perspective, the descriptions and partial measurements in this book are priceless. While I do occasionally make a total reproduction, typically I like to design new pieces within the parameters of 18th-century furniture. To do this, I visit museums and study classic pieces. There's nothing better than visit-

ing a museum, but when you can't go back for a quick look, it's great to have this resource within arm's reach. It includes descriptions, historical background, and some dimensions.

—Lonnie Bird is a woodworking teacher and furniture maker in Dandridge, Tenn.

## First on most shelves

*Understanding Wood* by R. Bruce Hoadley. The Taunton Press, 2000 (updated and revised since the 1980 original).

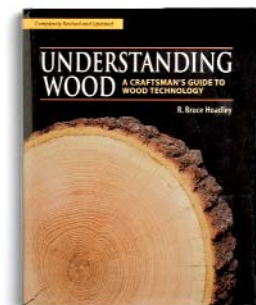
I have a library with upwards of 100 texts on botany and wood-related subjects. But most of them are a little technical and too specialized for the typical woodworker. I think this is the best book for beginning woodworkers who are interested in understanding the properties of the medium. Also, for those who want to develop skills in wood identification, Hoadley's *Identifying Wood* (The Taunton Press, 1990) is the right place to start.

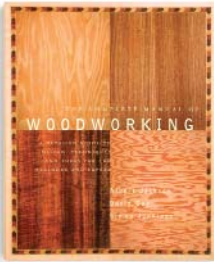
—Jon Arno is a regular contributor to Fine Woodworking.

## One-stop resource for beginners

*The Complete Manual of Woodworking* by Albert Jackson and David Day. Knopf, 1996.

Wonderfully sketched illustrations and no-nonsense explanations made this the only resource I turned to





when I began woodworking as a hobby. The book covers topics ranging from wood identification to furniture ergonomics to power- and hand-tool techniques thoroughly and succinctly; the answer to any basic question is undoubtedly somewhere inside. But you might have to scour through every scribble of handwritten captions to find it.

—Matt Berger

### Finishing primer

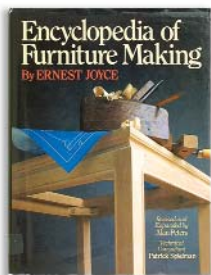
***The Complete Illustrated Guide to Finishing* by Jeff Jewitt. The Taunton Press, 2004.**

There are many accurate and informative books on finishing, but most of them lack the one characteristic I appreciate most in my teaching: practicality. Jewitt clearly comes across as someone who works at the art of finishing every day. He details what works and what doesn't when it comes to hand-applied and spray finishes. From the beginning Jewitt reveals very clearly his philosophy about doing all the right preparation steps. He also reveals secrets for setting up a finishing area for the correct temperature, humidity, and lighting, as well as tips on the tooling and products needed for proper surface preparation. The book also covers the gamut of finishes, including dyes and pigments, grain fillers, color layering with glazes, and all of the various topcoats, but it doesn't get bogged down with heavy commentary or chemical jargon. It's just simply how to do it. This is the book that all woodworkers and finishers alike must have on their shelf, right next to the can of Danish oil.

—Teri Masaschi is a professional finisher and teacher near Albuquerque, N.M.

### Woodworking from A to Z

***Encyclopedia of Furniture Making* by Ernest Joyce; revised by Alan Peters. Sterling Publishing, 2000 (a revision of the 1970 edition).**



For good reason, this book sometimes is called the Woodworker's Bible. The original version, published in England in 1970, was created as a text for students entering the woodworking trades. The book covers all facets of furniture making: materials, tools, techniques, joinery, design, finishing, and restoration. In 1987, Alan Peters and Patrick Spielman took on the job of revising and updating the text. Some of the furniture styles in this book look terribly dated, but the technical information offered in the text is extensive and significant.

—William Duckworth

### The elegant engineering of casework

***Solid-Wood Cabinet Construction* by Franz Karg. The Taunton Press, 1991.**

Flip through this book too quickly, and you'll easily overlook its strength: the details. It sat on my book-

shelf for years before I discovered it. The 70 modern-leaning designs found here—even if they're not your favorite—are brilliantly engineered and instructive, no matter what style you build. This book isn't weighted down by words, but the photos do just as well telling the story.

—Matthew Teague is the former managing editor of *Fine Woodworking*.

### Quintessential Shaker

***The Book of Shaker Furniture* by John Kassay. University of Massachusetts Press, 1980.**

Shaker craftsmen pared their furniture to the essentials of proportion, detail, and construction. I often leaf through Kassay's book to look at the elegant simplicity of Shaker work, its economy of construction and technique. Looking at the book is much like touring an extensive Shaker museum—only better. There are good descriptions of more than 70 pieces, explaining unusual features, dimensions, and woods used, and an excellent variety of each furniture type to compare side by side. But unlike any museum, Kassay takes some pieces apart through clear drawings and cutlists. He has taught me much about joinery that lasts, the scale of parts such as drawer sides and bottoms, and how to use different woods.

—Garrett Hack is a contributing editor.

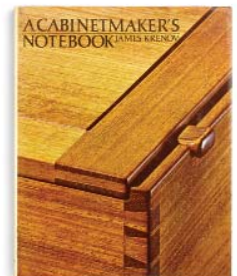


### The philosophy behind a revolution

***A Cabinetmaker's Notebook* by James Krenov. Linden Publishing, 2000 (originally published in 1976).**

The furniture of James Krenov has influenced many woodworkers, but his philosophy of woodworking has influenced many more. I discovered Krenov's book while I was in college, and it has inspired a lifelong passion for the craft of woodworking. It also has taught me to take my time and do it right even where no one is looking. Krenov's writing is friendly and intimate with a focus more on the why rather than on the how-to of woodworking. The simple elegance and consummate craftsmanship of his furniture pictured in the book are an appropriate illustration of his ideas and philosophies. Krenov published two more books before he moved to Northern California in 1981 and attained his semi-cult-figure status: *The Impractical Cabinetmaker* (Linden Publishing, 1999 reprint) and *The Fine Art of Cabinetmaking* (Sterling Publishing, 1992 reprint). These books also are worth reading.

—Michael Pekovich is the art director.



### Stickley: ready to build

***Shop Drawings for Craftsman Furniture: 27 Stickley Designs for Every Room in the House***

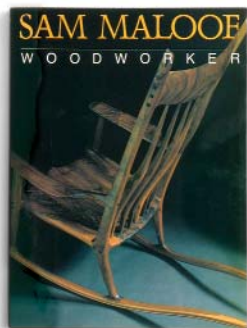
measured and drawn by Robert W. Lang. Cambium Press, 2001.

No matter what your level of woodworking, if you like to build Arts and Crafts furniture, you'll like this book. Lang has taken photos from old Stickley catalogs, scaled them, and then produced working drawings and cutlists. The book also offers a brief history of the style and how-to information for the most commonly used Craftsman techniques. Lang has produced three more books in this series.

—Matthew Teague

### Woodworking for a living

**Sam Maloof: Woodworker** by Sam Maloof. Kodansha International, 1989.



The author's handwritten business card reads "Sam Maloof, Woodworker." This autobiographical book of the same title is loaded with Maloof's sketches, practical woodworking tips, measured drawings, and a generous mix of both color and black-and-white photographs. This is a must-read for anyone trying to make a living at woodworking.

—Lon Schleining is a frequent contributor to Fine Woodworking.

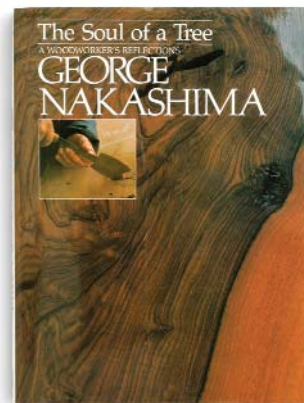
Likewise, the photography is exceptional, capturing all of the details that make these pieces so exquisite.

—Steve Latta

### The first "woodworker"

**The Soul of a Tree: A Woodworker's Reflections** by George Nakashima. Kodansha International, 1988.

If you want to know how the modern era of woodworking was launched, this is a must-read. However, like the man, the scope is much greater than furniture making alone. Nakashima's tale, told beautifully in the first person, is a story of the entire 20th century, from his childhood memories of the Pacific Northwest to a quest for personal truth that led him in the 1920s and 1930s from Paris and Tokyo to an ashram in India, and finally, to New Hope, Pa., where he raised his family and developed a style of furniture and craftsmanship that has been widely influential. Rich photographs, many good enough to frame, document Nakashima's life, his process of selecting wood and building furniture, and the many revolu-



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**"If you want to know how the modern era of woodworking was launched, *The Soul of a Tree* is a must-read."**

—Asa Christiana

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### Don't fear the chair

**Chairmaking and Design** by Jeff Miller. The Taunton Press, 1997.

For years I was intimidated at the thought of building a chair, but this book demystified the process and walked me through the first few chairs I built. When it comes to a good all-around book on the construction of eight chairs, there's nothing better on the market. And if Miller's often generic designs don't inspire you, check out the small drawings scattered throughout the book—all of them are easily built using Miller's instructions.

—Matthew Teague

### Federal at its finest

**The Furniture Masterworks of John & Thomas Seymour** by Robert D. Mussey Jr. Peabody Essex Museum, 2004.

This is a new release, but it is an absolutely wonderful treatment of these two craftsmen who produced great work while living in Boston during the high point of the Federal period. The book is the culmination of a 10-year study by Mussey, and he's done a phenomenal job putting his findings down on paper.

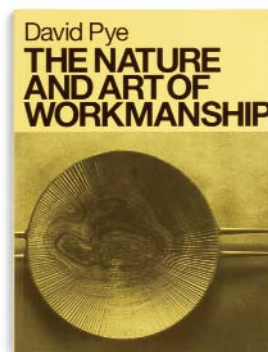
tionary buildings and houses he designed at his New Hope compound.

—Asa Christiana is the managing editor.

### How to work efficiently

**The Nature and Art of Workmanship** by David Pye. Cambium Press, 1995 (a reprint of the original 1968 book).

Much of the thinking and approach to woodworking taken by my generation of woodworkers was shaped by Pye. He was a scholar, craftsman, and philosopher who taught furniture design at the Royal College of Art in London until 1974. He used his credentials to establish a wide-reaching philosophy on the state of the craft. Particularly important, Pye introduced us to the concept of "workmanship of certainty versus workmanship of risk," in which he draws the distinction between rough and precise workmanship, and good and bad workmanship, noting that rough is not necessarily bad, just as precise is not necessarily good. Many of the misconceptions





and arguments among woodworkers would disappear if more of them were familiar with Pye. Also by Pye, *The Nature and Aesthetics of Design* (Cambium Press, 1995) is an important overture to furniture design. In it, he reveals a vocabulary he developed that can be used to solve any design dilemma.

—Mike Dunbar is a contributing editor.

### Last word on American furniture

*The New Fine Points of Furniture* by Albert Sack. Crown Publishers, 1993.



This is one of the most important books on American period furniture that you can own. Styles and elements are discussed in detail, from the humble beauty of the Pilgrim chair to the grandiose masterpiece secretaries of the Chippendale period to the classical tables of Duncan Phyfe. Comparisons of similar pieces are made, with Sack giving each one a rating ranging from good to masterpiece. This well-written

and beautifully photographed book gives a privileged initiation into the world of the great American master furniture makers.

—Karen Wales

### An old barn spills its guts

*A Reverence for Wood* by Eric Sloane. Dover Publications, 2004 (first published in 1965).

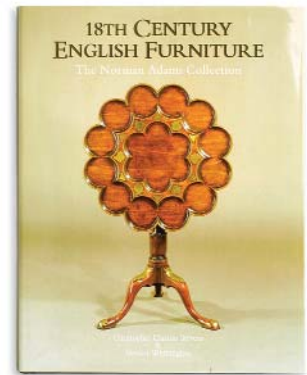
In a relaxed, narrative style, following the process of taking down an old barn, Sloane explains the early American's knowledge of and reliance on wood. The eastern forests contained hundreds of species of wood, each with its own use. He explains how early craftsmen used specific species for very special purposes: one wood for hinges, several different woods

for doors, four or five woods for a chair, and a multitude of woods for boats, barns, and wagons. This book really opened my eyes to the variety of woods, their uses, and the knowledge required to work the woods on hand for optimum results.

—Christian Becksvoort is a contributing editor.

### 18th-century eye candy

*18th Century English Furniture: The Norman Adams Collection* by Christopher Claxton Stevens and Stewart Whittington. Antique Collectors Club, 1998.



This book includes hundreds of photos of high-end furniture from what I regard as the apex of furniture design. I rarely try to copy a piece exactly, but I try to replicate the perfect proportions of a leg or a cabinet. The book shows how designs evolved from the slightly clunky to the almost perfect.

—Mark Schofield

### What the government knows about wood

*Wood Handbook: Wood as an Engineering Material*. Agricultural handbook No. 72. U.S. Forest Products Laboratory, 1999.

When I need a technical reference, I reach for this book most often. Whether I am calculating wood movement, looking for the working characteristics of a certain species, trying to determine how much load a shelf can take, or figuring out what kind of fasteners to use, it's all in this book. Want to know how to cut and lay cedar shakes or timber-frame a house? Yep, all that's here, too. There are things in this book you didn't even know you needed to know.

—Matthew Teague

## How to find out-of-print books

Many of these suggested readings are out of print, but that doesn't mean they're out of reach. Several sources on the Internet make it possible to find and purchase dated or obscure titles.

The granddaddy of online booksellers is Amazon.com, which began as an Internet-only bookseller and now sells everything from tablesaws to books about tablesaws. Most of its inventory is new titles, but a number of independent booksellers also offer used books through Amazon.com.

Powell's Books ([www.powells.com](http://www.powells.com)), based in Portland, Ore., isn't as large as Amazon, but it still has an impressive in-

ventory of new and used books to sort through on its Web site. eBay, the online flea market, is another source.

For some of the more hard-to-find books, there's Biblio.com, an online marketplace for rare, out-of-print titles. It combines the inventory of hundreds of independent booksellers from around the world into a single search engine. Type in the title or author you're looking for, and the site will retrieve purchasing information from all participating dealers that have the particular book in stock.

Finally, for a comprehensive selection of woodworking titles, both current and

out of print, there's Cambium Books ([www.cambiumbooks.com](http://www.cambiumbooks.com)). Cambium's inventory comes from a number of publishers around the world, and it runs a small imprint of its own that produces new titles. The Connecticut-based company also has made a habit of buying the rights to popular woodworking books that are no longer available and bringing them back into print. Examples include two of David Pye's influential books. Linden Publishing ([www.lindenpub.com](http://www.lindenpub.com)), out of Fresno, Calif., runs a similar operation and has republished some notable titles, including two of James Krenov's popular books.